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THE SECRET OF TECHNIQUE

By HERBERT J. WRIGHTSON

IT is a source of wonder to many that while the average person has difficulty in attaining to even a fair degree of skill, certain individuals acquire quite a prodigious technical dexterity in their respective lines of work. It seems as if there must be some factor entering into the conditions more than the mere amount of labor and effort put forth by each, and more even than the degree of so-called "natural talent" possessed by the one or the other; and the phrase "wizard of the keyboard" when applied to some famous pianist, almost seems to be justified in a literal sense, and to imply some distinct and extraordinary power, bordering, at least, on the supernatural.

This marvelous "technique," as we call it, is not limited to musicians, for the same principle applies in may other cases—billiards, tennis, typewriting, juggling, anything in fact where the acquirement of extreme skill is an object. What and whence is this magic? Let us investigate. And if we consider carefully the process by which the human mechanism is enabled to exhibit skill at all, even in the simplest forms, we may be able to find the apparently secret path which leads in a few isolated cases to the extraordinary results referred to: which, followed even part of the way, conducts to a certain distinguished degree of achievement, far removed from the mediocrity of the average.

The process required in the performance of any act of skill, even of the most moderate order, appears to be the following: Observation—Perception of cause and effect—Reproduction of the same.

The only imaginable incentive to the inception of this process in connection with any line of action is *Interest*. It may safely be said that no one ever did anything well who did not enjoy doing it at least in some aspect. Skill in, and indifference to any subject are entirely incompatible. Now, the greater one's interest in anything, the more one's faculties are on the alert concerning it. We are then more than usually *observant* with regard to this subject, and begin to investigate the causes which produce effects. We are obsessed with the thing itself, and search diligently to find how it is done; instead of, as is the case with the perfunctory worker, plodding away at uninteresting elements and expecting something to grow out of it. Only the vision of the finished result can supply the true incentive. We proceed from the idea downwards to the details, never the reverse way, just as the surgeon by study of the body may obtain complete mastery of the human anatomy, but could never take the physiological elements and so piece them together as to make a man.[1]

Although the success of our work depends upon our having in mind some ideal, this does not mean necessarily the ideal of something advanced and complicated, but merely the perfect form of even the simplest thing we attempt. The desire to produce an effect resembling this mental image then causes an alert attention, which in its turn reveals the weak and imperfect points of our attempted reproduction, and it is but another step to correct them. Just as initial interest in the subject produces observation, the latter again produces more interest, and so on in an increasing ration. It follows that the resulting scrupulous attention to and control of detail are not only essential for themselves but as an indication of a right mental attitude. Mechanical accuracy may not always lead to virtuosity but carelessness and inaccuracy never can. On a perfect foundation we may build a cottage or a skyscraper, but on an imperfect one, not more than the cottage, and with small stability at that.

It will probably be found that this is the rock upon which most of the failures have gone to pieces. It is not that they cannot perceive the departure from exactness in what they do, but they follow the "line of least resistence" and let it go at that. "Near enough" is their motto; and perhaps the subconscious thought is present "next time it may go better," meaning of course "it may happen to go better." But why should it? It is plainly absurd to expect such a thing. One is sometimes inclined to ask a careless pupil, "how many incorrect repetitions of the passage do you expect, will produce a perfect and satisfactory result?"

We may be told that some persons are "very fond of music"—that is, much interested; but cannot learn to play well. The explanation of such a state of things can only be that they are not interested to the extent of *Observation* and still less to that of *Perception of Cause and Effect.* They must realize that they can produce a desired result only by perfecting the elements which go to make it—after all not so much a difficult matter as a neglected one.

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[1] A recent sensational sketch dealing with wonders of modern surgery, illustrated a new and strange being, which had been pieced together by the marvelous feats of science, arising from the operating table, to the terror of the attendants and even of the surgeons themselves. While such a thing seems logically possible, its absolute impossibility and incongruity from the subjective or philosophical standpoint is what lends the idea its gruesomeness. What we call a human being *has* a body with all the anatomical details thereof, because it is first an entity requiring these for its expression. The assembling of all the anatomical parts in the world would not avail to form one individual being. In other words, effect never proceeds to cause.

Every sensation received by the physical organism while practising must be acutely observed and registered, so that certain action is distinctly associated in the consciousness with (in music) certain audible effects. These definite impressions are then used in duplicating the effect produced, or on the other hand, avoiding duplication. The real object of slow practice demanded by all good teachers is precisely that these impressions on the receptive medium of the brain shall be definite and distinct. Slowness has little value in itself. In fact, speed *with distinct impression* is probably preferable to slowness with the same amount of impression. The polyphonic music of Bach derives its chief technical value to the piano student from the close observation demanded for its performance at all, and hence the greater definiteness of the impressions received.

Endless repetition of a passage with the mind but slightly applied, is not only useless but injurious. It would really be more beneficial to think a passage a number of times without playing it, than to play it without thinking it—another view of the fact that the mental impression is the thing. It is the combination of the two, however—thought and action—which is necessary. The mind must think the actions, and the nerves and muscles must become accustomed to acting the thought. Certain purely technical exercises produce these essential conditions by their very peculiarity, as the mind must be concentrated upon them in order to perform them. All other kinds are futile. In fact almost any kind soon becomes monotonous, and the activity of the mind flags. The opinion has already been expressed by famous pianists that great technique can be obtained better from real music than from purely technical studies. The reason is obvious from the foregoing remarks. If the principle does not seem to apply with some students, who prefer only "pieces," much to *their* disadvantage, it is because a perfect mechanical reading is not striven for, but the "near enough" process used, in getting a general effect. Under this kind of treatment, no class of work would benefit the student.

Technique is a development of nerves and muscles *only derivable from highly conscious action.* Their overuse, without this, will cause hypertrophy, or a diseased condition, noticeably more common among hard students of average attainments than among virtuosi, who accomplish far more. The vitalizing effect of alert consciousness during action preserves the parts in perfect health, while conducing to their utmost development.

The pianist is perhaps more liable than any other cultivator of high dexterity to the phenomenon of reflex action; that is, the signs of notation are acted upon by habit and unconsciously. The eye sees and the hands operate, at times, with too little mental activity. Every pianist knows that occasionally his mind may wander away on something else and that he may have played a page, or half a page, absolutely without any remembrance of having played it. One great advantage of doing piano work from memory rather than from notes is evident here as this phase or reflex action, at any rate, is eliminated. *It is cultivation of the rapid and accurate THOUGHT that makes the great technician.* Everything is done consciously, so that minute differences in action and effect are noted, and the technique continually grows by accretion. Such a worker will naturally remember with ease and distinctness much of the work done, for he was strongly conscious all the time of what he was doing. He has thus another aid to proper performance of the same work on repetition, as well as the only true system of memorizing.

In conclusion, the following words of Canning may be quoted, and should be remembered by those who desire technique of any kind to a high degree. They do not in themselves form an "Open Sesame!" to the locked door of virtuosity, but they do indicate to some extent the mental attitude which is the key to the mystery: "Only those who have the patience to do simple things perfectly, can acquire the skill to do difficult things easily."